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## 'It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play'

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Harry "Jazzbo" Heywood (Jerry Motta), Jake Laurents (Dan Saski), Sally Applewood (Jenna Stich), Dennis Kirkwood (John Blytt), and Carol Roundtree (Jacqui Herrera) Photo Stu Selland

hopeful and profoundly humanistic, even if it deals with someone who has decided to end his life. As a radio show, this rendition of the story condenses its meaning to its essence, without taking away any of the emotion. Here, tribute goes to the talented actors. As they read their scripts over the "microphones," the power of their emotions and the images of their adventures are evoked in the spectators' minds, just like listening to a story on the radio or on tape underscores the magic of the imagination.

For many families, watching "It's a Wonderful Life" is a holiday tradition. Religion does not play a role in the play, since it deals with questions of humanity and, as THT director Samantha Fryer puts it, how each individual has an important part to play in this life, and how we all make a difference every day. For her, though, watching the movie was never a tradition; she said she's never seen the Frank Capra movie with Jimmy Stewart. Fryer nonetheless is familiar with the play version, as she produced and played it several times in the Bay Area, and now for her debut at Town Hall Theatre, she directs the show.

Fryer said it was difficult to pick the perfect cast: More than 100 actors responded to the audition announcement. "We saw many very talented actors," says Fryer, "but what I focused on was their interaction and vocal talent."

This play focuses on the power of that vocal talent. "I think that Jerry (Motta) is the only character who actually talks to himself with different voices," says Fryer about the actor who plays Uncle Billy, Clarence the angel, and Harry "Jazzbo" Heywood. The actors portray different characters who have a similar vibe in their relationship to George.

The actors' work to bring the show to maturity was quite involved. During the auditions, Fryer asked them to read entire pages of the script to see how they would impersonate different characters; during rehearsals she would sometimes close her eyes or turn her back to the stage to identify each character only by their distinctive voice. "We also did a very serious work of character development, working on intentions, because the more you deepen your understanding of a character, the more the voice develops," she states.

Beginning Dec. 6 in Lafayette, you can step back in time and be part of a radio show's live audience during Town Hall Theatre Company's production of "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play."

It's the night before Christmas in 1948 at a radio studio in New York City, and a live audience has been invited to the recording of the radio show's version of "It's a Wonderful Life." The studio is decked out for Christmas, and the voice actors are dressed up and ready to go - the actor who will impersonate George Bailey, the actress who will be Mary Bailey, the others who will play two or three different characters - and of course the sound specialist is there, too, ready to create the atmosphere for the listeners who are cuddled around radio sets in their living rooms, close - but not too close - to the fireplace, to listen to Philip Van Doren Stern's story while sipping their eggnog or hot cocoa.

There are a few major attributes about this show that make it a perfect holiday experience for the whole family. The story itself, of course, is so

All the actors selected for this show are seasoned and know how to evoke powerful emotions. The result is quite stunning, and this reporter challenges any viewer not to shed a tear at one point or another during the show.

Also, special kudos to James Frankle, the sound-effects person on stage who uses delightful live tricks to trigger auditory responses.

"It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play" runs from Dec. 6-20, with previews on Dec. 4 and 5, and matinees on the weekends. For more information, go to [townhalltheatre.com](http://townhalltheatre.com) or call (925) 283-1557.

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